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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses resolution three passed in 1974 by the Conference on College Composition and Communication at Anaheim, which states,"...all retention and tenure decisions...be securely based on a thorough, balanced, and professional evaluation of teaching competence..." A system developed by the author which approaches the spirit of this resolution is described and recommended for college teachers of English, especially those teaching composition courses for students in other disciplines. The system involves inviting teachers of humanities from outside one's own department to evaluate one's students; inviting people from within the student's profession to evaluate; inviting the general public to see one's students, both in person and on a video-tape television program; and inviting people from the humanities profession and from the student's profession to submit a confidential evaluation of one's teaching competence to one's department chairperson. (TS)

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ACCOUNTABILITY: OR LET OTHERS GRADE YOUR STUDENTS

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Paper to be presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 14 March 1975, in St. Louis, Missouri.

As I am sure you are all aware, the number of advertised positions for teachers of English at the college level has declined from about twelve hundred in 1968-69 to ninety-two in 1973-74. That is a drop of 92% in four years. This unhappy development led this organization, the Conference on College Composition and Communication to adopt the following Resolution:

> Background: Lower enrollments, or the fear of lower enrollments; decreased budgets, or the threat of decreased budgets; community pressures; and legislative demands for economy and accountability have led some colleges and universities to dismiss faculty members with little or no notice, ignoring the obligations of tenure and bypassing the procedural safeguards intended to protect untenured faculty. Because English departments are especially vulnerable to such administrative retrenchment, the method by which these dismissals are handled becomes a special concern of CCCC.
>
> Resolved, first that CCCC express its condemnation of the arbitrary abrogation of tenure, the mass dismissal of untenured staff, and the elimination of due process; and second, that CCCC strongly urge that all retention and tenure decisions, whether or not they involve a reduction in staff size, be securely based on a thorough, balanced, and professional evaluation of teaching competence, and a consideration of each faculty member's contributions in creative, research, and professional work. (Reference 1)

The phrase that interests me most in this resolution is "... that all retention and tenure decisions, whether or not they involve a reduction in staff size, be securely based on a thorough, balanced, and professional evaluation of teaching competence...."

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I am strongly in favor of this phrase of Resolution Number Three; I believe that I have developed a system which approaches the spirit of this resolution, and I should like to describe it to you and urge you to adopt it, or some modification of it.

In essence, I ask people within my profession, that is, teachers of English or humanities, but from outside my department or university, to evaluate and grade my students. But in addition, I also ask people within the student's profession to evaluate and grade my students. Further, I invite the general public to see how my students can communicate, both live and on a video-tape television program. And finally, I ask the people from my profession, and from the student's profession to submit a confidential evaluation of my teaching competence to my departmental chairman.

Do these procedures satisfy the phrase "... professional evaluation of teaching competence...?"

Well, first what does "professional" evaluation mean? In medicine, in law, and in engineering, "professional evaluation" means evaluation by selected senior members of a professional organization. For example, the State Medical Society determines whether or not a physician is qualified to practice, and if you should decide to specialize in surgery, you must submit to the regular and routine evaluation of your performance by a committee of your peers in the hospital which grants you staff privileges. In like manner the State Bar Association determines whether or not a lawyer is qualified to practice within the state. A senior member of the profession, a judge, will oversee your performance in court, and should you fail to uphold the law, the State Bar Association will disbar you and you will no longer be able to

practice in the state. Engineers are likewise subject to test by their peers if they wish to become Professional Engineers, and the Engineers Council for Professional Development regularly inspects the staff and courses of engineering colleges which wish to remain accredited.

In the arts "professional evaluation" means exhibition, a public display of your work. A poet must publish, a pianist must play, a singer must give a recital, a sculptor or a painter must have an exhibition. Until the artist goes public, he remains a non-professional, an amateur.

If you really subscribe to the Resolution which this organization adopted in California just one year ago, then I think you must either permit your teaching to be examined and monitored by senior members of your professional society, or you must put your students on public display where the general public can evaluate the product of your teaching. Or you can do both.

The first course of action, evaluation by senior members of your professional society has long been practiced in England, but there a student normally studies just one subject in great detail for three years. If you are studying chemistry, you take only courses in chemistry, unless the chemistry faculty feels that a few hours of some related subject is essential to your later career as a chemist. At the end of your course of studies you will be evaluated by an External Examiner, usually a distinguished member of the professional society who is also a member of the faculty of another university. The External Examiner will recommend the sort of degree you should receive; first class, second class, third, or pass.

After spending a term at the University of Wales as a Visiting Professorial Fellow, I decided that I would experiment with some modification of the External Examiner system on my return to Michigan. I teach a service course, a composition course, to students not majoring in English just as most of you do, and at first it may seem difficult to see how one could adapt the External Examiner system to a one-term service course.

But I have one tremendous advantage over most of you: I don't teach composition to freshmen who have yet to enter a specialized course of study and for this reason are limited to writing about their earlier personal experiences. Yet I teach the same sort of students you do--and I trust you are aware that U. S. Office of Education figures indicate that out of every class of twenty students enrolled in freshman English composition, three, just three, will major in some form of the humanities, five will major in the social sciences, and twelve, over half the class, will major in the natural sciences, engineering, mathematics, business, the biological and health professions, etc. (Reference 2) So my composition students are very similar to yours, but I teach them to write and talk about their own disciplines. By the senior year they know a good deal about a number of interesting subjects and are eager to tell other people about them. For this reason they are much more interesting to teach than freshmen. I have argued about the logic and practicality of moving instruction in composition to the senior year a number of times in the past, so I won't repeat the argument here, but if anyone is interested, I'd be happy to send him some reprints.

Now if you are teaching a student to write and talk about his

own discipline, it seems sensible to follow the English plan, to have some senior man within that discipline determine whether or not the student is doing an adequate job. I began by calling upon Emeritus Professors of engineering. It occurred to me that some of them had only recently retired and rather missed their students and their classrooms. Moreover, many of them had been distinguished teachers and well known scholars. And, although I blush to admit this, I thought that they might be willing to evaluate my students for free, because I had no funds with which to pay them as External Examiners are paid in England.

But as nearly every engineering professor will tell you, and as the directions to contributors of Science, the journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, will also suggest, it is important for a specialist to make himself understandable to the non-specialist. So I also sought Emeritus Professors of the humanities to sit with the emeritus engineers as External Examiners. The names of the engineers may not mean much to an assembly of English teachers, but the names of Arno Bader, former director of the Hopwood Creative Writing Contest at Michigan, and Clark Hopkins, Professor Emeritus of Classical Studies, and Warner Rice, former Chairman of English Department at Michigan, may be familiar to some of you. (NOTE)

NOTE: Among the engineers who have been gracious enough to assist me are: Emeritus Professors Walter Emmons, Arlen Hellwarth, A. D. Moore, Arnold Kuethe, Axel Marin, and Clay Porter. And still active teachers of engineering--Bruce Karnopp, Amelio D'Arcangelo, Harm Buning, Joe Eisley, Hansford W. Farris--have also helped as have Rudolph Schmerl, Stanford Ericksen, and Joe Mullen of humanities.

All of these people had been drawn from the University of Michigan, and it began to seem to me that it would be advisable to avoid becoming ingrown and to seek evaluators from outside my own university. The engineers might be drawn from local industries with the help of the College of Engineering Placement Office. So this Fall Term I was able to get three such engineers, and this seems to have turned the tap on a steady supply of engineering examiners because these three have now persuaded the Ann Arbor Engineers Club, 100 strong, to attend the final examination in my course this April.

For the non-engineering examiners I turned to our sister institution, Eastern Michigan University, only ten miles away, and persuaded the present chairman and the former chairman of the English Department there, Milton Foster and Hoover Jordan, to come evaluate my students. I used only one person from my own university. You may have read with a chuckle, or with indignation, the article entitled "An Anthropologist Among English Teachers" in the October 1974 issue of College Composition and Communication. (Reference 3) Since the author, Robbins Burling, of Michigan's Anthropology and Linguistics Department was strongly critical of teachers of writing, and since he was only just across the campus, I decided to invite him too, and to my delight he accepted.

Finally, although I invite the general public to come hear the 10-minute oral presentations my students give for their External Examiners, I have found it difficult to attract an audience during the period of university examinations. So this last Fall Term I video-taped all these student lectures and the question periods that followed, nine hours in all, and these were broadcast over the educational channel of our local Cable TV network. I don't know

how many people viewed these telecasts, but I do know that the student performers urged their friends to watch.

How does this system work? Well, first of all, remember that I am teaching seniors, not freshmen. The course title is Scientific and Technical Communication. Nearly every one of these seniors is taking some course in his own field of specialization in which he must write a term paper anyway. If he is a Chemical Engineer, he may be designing a system to remove the sulphur from the oil produced by a refinery in order to meet EPA standards. If he is a Naval Architect, he may be designing a ship. If he is an Industrial Engineer, he may be designing an improved admissions procedure for a hospital. I urge the students to get the permission of the instructor in that engineering class to use the same report or term paper in my class as the final report upon which their grade will be based. The instructors have never withheld permission; indeed, they often show up at the final examination in my course to see how their students did.

But I point out to the students that the report they submit to me at the end of the term will be read and graded by an engineer who may have specialized in a field different from theirs. And, moreover, the report will be read and graded by a non-engineer, probably an English teacher. Finally, I announce that they will be asked to give a 10-minute oral presentation of this report to these External Examiners, that the general public, including the Dean of the college and the chairmen of all the departments and the Ann Arbor Engineers Club will be invited and permitted to ask questions, and that these presentations will be video-taped for later telecast.

Generally a sort of hush falls over the class when I announce all this. Then someone usually asks, "You mean that our whole grade in this course is going to depend on that one last report, and that you are going to let two outsiders, one an English teacher, decide what it should be?"

"Yes," I say, "That is exactly right. You are going to have to make yourselves clear to your bosses, who may very well be lawyers or business majors. At the same time you are going to have to persuade an engineer, who really understands what you are talking about, that you know your job and haven't made any mistakes. You will often have to do this both on paper and in an oral briefing. So you might as well start practicing now before you leave college. My job is to help you get the best possible grade from those External Examiners. The more A's you get, the happier I'll be."

But I also warn them that A's may not be easy to get, that B is the common grade. Fortunately C's have been relatively rare. Most of the External Examiners have commented that all of the students were interesting and that it took a really excellent performance to make a student stand out. But after all, isn't that what an A is supposed to represent?

When I first began this system in the summer of 1972, I felt that it would be an imposition to ask volunteer External Examiners to read the written reports as well as listen to the 10-minute lectures. But I have found that they <u>are</u> willing to read the reports, provided there aren't too many, as well as listen to the lectures. Robbins Burling commented that he developed an impression of a student from the way in which he wrote and was interested to discover that this impression was confirmed and strengthened when he heard the

student speak. So I now ask for two copies of the final report, one for each External Examiner, a couple of days before the final exam so that the Examiners will have the week-end to look them over before they come to listen to the students.

In arranging the syllabus of the course I find that it is important to start backward, that is, with the dates of the final oral presentations. Since I teach three sections of the same course, I know that I will have approximately 45 students. If each one talks for 10 minutes and answers questions for 5 minutes--15 minutes per student, or four students per hour--I will have to schedule eleven hours and 15 minutes at the end of the term just to get all these speeches in. Now no one is willing to give up all that time to listen to a series of speeches, no matter who is talking. So I arrange for three or four evening sessions, each lasting about 3 hours and try to find three or four pairs of Examiners, one pair for each evening.

Once this final arrangement is settled, the rest of the syllabus is designed to lead up to it, like a series of rehearsals leading up to a performance. Anyone interested in this schedule will be able to read it in the Spring 1975 issue of The Technical Writing Teacher, edited by Don Cunningham of Morehead State University in Kentucky.

Are there any disadvantages to this idea? Yes, one important one. It will scare you. I have long known that Warner Rice, Milton Foster, and Hoover Jordan are exceptionally pleasant people, even if they are, or have been, department chairmen. But the prospect of having them grade my students frightened me. I fretted and fumed and expostulated all term long in a desperate effort to avoid having my students make fools of themselves in either writing or speaking

before these men. Fortunately, the gentlemen were kind and made allowances for my ineptitude.

Are there advantages to such a system? Yes, I think there are several.

First, I am not a scholar. I cannot argue that I am an expert in any field of knowledge. If I were a scholar it would be much easier for my department chairman, my Dean, and my peers to evaluate my competence. My publications would stand open to their inspection. But, like many English teachers, I have published only a couple of articles based upon original research. For this reason if my Dean should inquire around the country, "What do you think of Tom Sawyer?" most faculty members would respond, "A pretty good book." Only three or four people, and they would be in psychology departments, would ever have read my articles and have an opinion about my scholarship.

No, I am a teacher, not a scholar, just as many of you are. And if I am to establish a reputation, it will have to be based upon my teaching, and it will have to be demonstrated publicly. I cannot retreat into the classroom with a group of students at the start of the term and emerge only at the end saying that I have taught them something. I must be able to convince my peers, not only on my own campus but elsewhere, that I have indeed taught them something. This system is one way of convincing people that I have done my job.

If you teach, and if you like teaching and are proud of your students, why not show them off? Let everyone see them. Music teachers do; even football coaches do. If you don't, maybe you aren't as good as you think you are. Maybe it's all in your imagination.

Another advantage. I hate grading papers. This is not to say

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that I mind helping students write them. I genuinely enjoy trying to help them explain pulse code modulation, the operation of the cyclotron, or the study of trace elements in human hair by neutron activation analysis. But I hate giving grades and I hate squabbling over whether this paper should be a B or a C, and trying to figure out where a student stands three-quarters of the way through the term, and will his standing in this course adversely affect his grade-point average? And so forth. Once I turn all this evaluation over to the External Examiners, the problem vanishes.

There is another advantage that I had not anticipated. The students now in a subtle way regard me as an ally, rather than as an opponent. I am just as interested in getting them a good grade from the Examiners as they are. So they look to me for help and advice and we work together. This is a lot better than sitting in my office as a judge and receiving those irate students who feel they have grounds for appeal and wish to explain why this paper was really worth a C rather than a D. I can now give pages full of advice and comment, and sometimes my comments are longer than the student's paper, but these are no longer arguments to justify a grade and the students read them in that light.

The fourth advantage is that I am, to some extent, freed from the taint of bias. It is nearly impossible for any teacher who sees a student day after day to avoid building up an impression of that student, sometimes favorable, sometimes unfavorable. And it is impossible to avoid revealing this attitude. If you think a student is a slob, he'll know it and will suspect that your attitude colors your judgment of him, as it probably does. The External Examiners protect this student from my bias. In like manner, they protect

the entire class from my favoritism. I have never given a grade not recommended by one or the other of my Examiners, but I am interested to note that I have been more often surprised by the Examiners rating a student A or B when I considered him either a dullard or lack-a-daisical and worth only a C than I have been their rating a student average when I considered him excellent.

Finally, and this may be the most important advantage to this system, I think I can now provide my department chairman, Professor Richard E. Young, with a more reliable and useful evaluation of my teaching competence than he would otherwise get. And in a university such as the University of Michigan where promotion, tenure, and salary increases are based on merit, it is absolutely vital that a reliable system of assessing merit be developed; otherwise it is easy for someone to assert that the system is unfair and biased, that he or she has been mis-judged, and the end result is dissatisfaction and lowered morale. I am now the most senior member of my department in terms of service if not in terms of age. But we are fortunate in having an exceptionally vigorous and talented group of younger people teaching for us. Among them are J. C. Mathes and Dwight Stevenson who teach the same course that I have just described, although they do not teach it quite as I do. But they will have a new text coming out this Fall, and this summer during the week of August 18th to 22nd they will offer a course in how to teach technical writing. Unless I can offer persuasive evidence to Professor Young that I am keeping up with these younger men, they will have legitimate grounds for complaint if I should receive a salary increase equal to or greater than their own.

Many people feel that student evaluations of teaching competence

can serve this purpose, but I am frankly doubtful. Although the College of Engineering has used college-wide computerized student-evaluations of all teachers for many years, I am not yet convinced that they do more than indicate the rapport between the student and the teacher. Rapport is very nice and often desirable, but I doubt that it is essential if one is to produce good students.

The validity of student evaluations as measures of teaching competence has been discussed in an interesting article entitled "Can Students Evaluate Good Teaching?" by Miriam Rodin in Change in summer 1973. (Reference 4) Professor Rodin found that there seems to be a negative correlation, and a strong one, between what a class of students learned in a course and their rating of the teacher. Instructors lowest on student evaluation scores produced students with the highest scores on a standardized final examination. An instructor rated highest by the students produced students with the lowest final examination scores.

Since my chairman, Professor Young, gets these computerized student evaluations as a matter of routine anyway, I ask my External Examiners to supplement this information by sending to him their own confidential assessment of my teaching competence. Although Professor Young has offered to show me these assessments, I have resisted the temptation, believing that the External Examiners would feel freer to comment if they were assured of confidentiality, and trusting Professor Young to point out my flaws and offer me corrective advice.

In closing, I call your attention to Change magazine of February 1974 in which Benjamin DeMott reports on some of the conclusions of the Panel on Alternative Approaches to Graduate Educa-

tion (Reference 5). Conclusions Three and Four read as follows:

> 3. Research-oriented institutions should establish periodic, discipline-based seminars to examine prevailing teaching methods. Students, faculty, outside experts, and employees should be involved.
>
> 4. Professional associations, especially in the humanities, should periodically appoint blueribbon committees of people inside and outside the institution to scrutinize current academic undertakings.

And at the 1974 Summer Seminar of the Association of Departments of English, the association for chairmen of English departments, Associate Dean Marilyn Williamson of Wayne State University, former chairman of the English Department there, proposed that every five or seven years a tenured faculty member should be asked to submit to a peer review by faculty members at another institution. (Reference 6) This review, she argues, could operate to emphasize teaching and professional development and establish for a teacher more than a purely local reputation. Moreover, she argues, this outside appraisal might compel administrations to give more than lip-service to the importance of teaching, and the regularity of such a review would answer the objections that a tenured position was a mere sinecure.

If we are going to insist, as we have done in Resolution Three passed at Anaheim, that "... all retention and tenure decisions... be securely based on a thorough, balanced, and professional evaluation of teaching competence..." then I believe we are going to have to move in the direction Dean Williamson and Professor DeMott's committee recommend. I have taken a modest step in this direction and Dean Williamson has kindly consented to come to Ann Arbor to act as External Examiner for me this April. Although the prospect scares me, I urge all of you to screw up your courage and try letting others grade your students.

As a demonstration of good faith, I have brought along some representative papers and some video-tapes so that you can assess my teaching competence too.

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